

## **Photography as artistic research**

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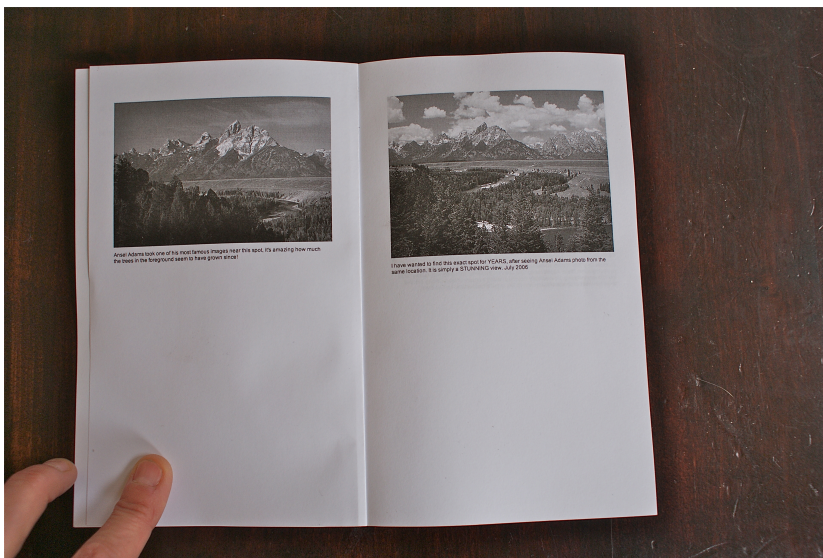
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Keywords: photography, representation, acting, artistic research, art, journalism, reality.

### *Photography and the reality of our world*

In 1983 the book *Für eine Philosophie der Photographie* by Czech-Brazilian media theorist Vilém Flusser was published. In this book Flusser describes the essence of photography. Photographs are magical. They catch our gaze and hold it. Whereas a text has a beginning and an ending, a photograph is something you fall into, like Alice fell into Wonderland. A photograph catches your gaze and does not let go. Photographs are moreover ‘apparatus-like’ images (images produced by an apparatus) which gives them a semblance of objectivity. Part of the physical reality through light falls into the apparatus and the photograph is the indexical impression of this. Photographs so much resemble the world as we know it, that we believe to be standing face to face with reality, instead of face to face with a mechanical reproduction. This is the reason why photographs place themselves between people and reality and they make us forget that the image is not reality, but an imprint of it. A photograph is an image, produced by a camera, which is an interpretation of reality, but is understood to be an imprint of reality itself. Images embed themselves into our awareness; programme the way we look at the world around us without being aware of this. And to complete the circle, these images then go on to determine what kind of photographs people are going to make. The mechanical, ‘apparatus-like’ production of photographs in the digital era has given way to endless production and reproduction of images produced by digital cameras. The result is an immense quantity of photographs which are partly still to be found in photo albums and archives, but which largely circulate the Internet these days. In 2012 the photo site Flickr hosted 6 billion photographs and the estimation of the number of photographs on

Facebook is 100 billion. Why, as a photographer, would you still want to make photographs? These large quantities of photographs online and people's need to copy things, was Joachim Schmid's starting point for the so-called 'Black Books' he put together. "But is it Art?" is a new addition to my series of black books exploring the realm of online photo hosting sites. The book contains images that are screenshots, specifically from the website Flickr. Each image shows people's attempts at creating photography "after", "based on", "in the style of" or "inspired by" well-known artists, to varying degrees of success. As individual attempts these samples may be charming, hilarious or bold (and sometimes embarrassing), as a group they raise more interesting questions of originality and authorship".<sup>i</sup> In the enclosed spread the page on the left shows the original image by Ansel Adams, and the page on the left shows the photograph made by the amateur photographer. The caption reads: *Ansel Adams took one of his most famous images near this spot, it's amazing how much the trees in the foreground seem to have grown since.*<sup>ii</sup>



Page from Joachim Schmid (2010) *But is it Art?* printing on demand book.<sup>iii</sup>

But also in a less literal way we reproduce the images, which are embedded in our memories like blueprints. In the world around us we see what the images have taught us to see. If people go on holiday, tempted by photographs in advertisements, they look for the images the travelling agent promised. That is what they take a picture of and this

picture they post on Facebook. According to Flusser - and he thought of this way before the internet era – photographs are not representations, but programmes which ask reality to move towards the image. This becomes most painfully clear in plastic surgery, where women are trying to look like photo-shopped depictions of women. In war journalism, quite often photographers are facing a reenacted reality in front of their cameras, either or not created by themselves. They and the press officers in war zones know only too well what kind of images newspaper readers in the west want to see.

We are caught in a web of images, on which reality has slowly lost its grip. This is the basic problem professional photography and each self-respecting photographer is facing. This may be the reason why Dutch photographer Hans Aarsman stopped photographing altogether. He now uses his professionalism to make reconstructions of reality (the situation which forms the foundation of the photograph) by means of a careful photo analysis. Not the programme of the image, but the visual marks not noticed by everyone, are what attract his attention. As a true photo detective he asks himself questions. What really happened here? What is that woman hiding behind her back? Who is that child smiling at, there in the corner of that picture? Why is that symbol on that car? Why was that photo taken portrait style and not landscape? Each week he publishes a photo review in the *Volkskrant* (one of the Netherlands' larger newspapers), in which he dissects every element of the photograph<sup>iv</sup>. His approach symbolizes the great quest of modern day photography: how can we change the way in which images make reality redundant? This awareness, present in today's photography practice, is the reason why photography is no longer an unproblematic representing activity. Documentary photography is changing from an activity in which images about the outside world can be presented as being true, into an activity, which asks the photographer to find a new sincere and authentic relationship with the social world.

#### *Centre of Expertise PRICCA Practice: photography as research practice*

Photography's modern day quest was the reason for the research group Image in Context, within Academy Minerva, to start up a centre of expertise in which the insights of photographers and artists concerning this problematic status of photography can be

brought together and studied. This centre of expertise PRICCAPractice (Photographic Research in Cross-disciplinary and Cross-cultural Artistic Practices) conducts research into the way in which professional photography is reinventing itself. It is aimed at the artistic research practices of artists, designers and photographers into the status of photography in our society. The focus lies on newly developed methods concerning photography as part of an interdisciplinary artistic (and critical) research practice; photography as a means of research to make reality visible again. For this reason it makes sense that photography should allow itself to be nourished and inspired by other reality-seeking disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology. Based on her interest in processes which are socially meaningful, photography moreover connects itself with fields of study such as semiotics, cultural studies, art theory and philosophy. And in her forms of expression she learns from literature, theatre, and journalism as forms of representation. In other words, the centre of expertise researches how dimensions of reality in photography are made into problems in images which are not merely representations, but also a commentary on photography itself and which explore the narrative and communicative possibilities and limitations of the photographic image at the same time. We are looking for artistic research practices in which a new, authentic relationship between the photographic image and reality will be researched.

In this paper I would like to present a few of these practices:

#### Papaplatfom: the open view

The Participating Artists Press Agency project by the Dutch artist Lino Hellings is a journalistic platform in the shape of a digital newspaper, which the reader can put together himself, based on choices.<sup>v</sup> In support of the photographs on the platform she developed a photographic method, which can be called the ‘open view method’. This method enables photographers to let go of their programmed view of the outside world, a view created by existing photographs, and which allows other photographs to be made rather than the more obvious ones; photographs in which reality can present itself in an image in a different way. This way people with a camera (artists, photographers, ordinary people) not only succeed in making pictures other than images of the predictable reality,



but these photographs also give them a different view of, for example, the city they live in. An important part of her method is starting with questions such as: how do older people live in the street? How do people take possession of the street? Where do they sleep? With questions such as these, the photographer immediately steps into a social reality. Secondly, it is important that you do not over-think and take photographs of everything that crosses your path. You take pictures of everything you see. From all these pictures that you bring home, you select two. These will be posted on a website; however, not without a textual explanation. The photographer writes his thoughts about the picture and gives the photograph a title. Moreover he places his name under the image.

See for example



Screenshot of the PAPA website.<sup>vi</sup>

The caption of the image states where it was made, in this case Bishek; who took the photograph, in this case Tatyana Mihnevich. The images also gets a title, in this case *Adding colors to a humdrum life* and a personal note: *Sunny color gloves were washed after work and hanged in order to dry in anticipation of the next time!*

Because of this open view reality succeeds in presenting itself in unexpected ways, which allows new images of the world around us to be created. Moreover these images are anchored in the maker. It is his image. And in the third place these images are given a clear context. The maker indicates why he is posting this image on a site (and so in a public space). Because the fact that it is not ‘anchored’ is one of the dangerous characteristics of photography as Flusser describes it. Photographs are magical because they are not anchored, but rather ‘floating’. By connecting them to the photographer and

making it his image, the image is anchored in the photographer. By also adding a title and commentary the images are not only anchored because it becomes clear what we are looking at, but also that the image has a certain intention. It is not reality. It says something about reality.

### Photographs as a central practice of storytelling

The second artistic practice in which an authentic connection with reality is sought by creating a different relationship with the medium of photography, is the PhD research of Dutch photographer Andrea Stultiens. Andrea is researching how photographs can give another representation than a colonial one of the African country Uganda. Her research question is: Photographs are made from a specific vantage point. How can this specificity colour and nuance the collective memory and be (part of) a (visual) narrative?’

The hegemonic image of Uganda arose in its colonial past. The representation of the past of countries that were colonised for a big part of the 20th century makes us aware that history is only a version of what happened. During the first half of that century the past was primarily documented by outsiders and shared through colonialists’ eyes. After that it was mostly reinvented with every change of regime and extremely ideologically coloured. In her research existing photographs are the starting point. Andrea found many photographs in private collections and public archives, which up until that point had no place in the collective memory of either Uganda’s population or that of the outsider, the Westerner. She posted these photographs on Facebook under the heading History in progress Uganda.



Screenshot of the Facebook page History in Progress Uganda by Andrea Stultiens. <sup>vii</sup>

Facebook is not only the place to which everyone with a computer and internet has access, it is also a public space in which people can respond to images. Facebook makes it possible to 'to create alternatives for the prevailing version(s) of the representation of (Ugandan) history by digitizing and sharing historic photographs. By doing this, these photographs can be put into context by those who lived at the time the photographs were taken, or know stories about it. This way they can become valuable in understanding the past and relating it to the present.' (<https://www.facebook.com/HIPUganda/info>)

Andrea is trying to add a correction to the colonial image by showing a more sincere, but repressed collective memory of Uganda's population, but in addition she wants to demonstrate that stories can develop around these images, which imbed the image itself and connect it to the teller of the story. This way we see a comparable anchoring taking place, perhaps not always in the actual photographer of the image, but in the context and the story, which belongs to it. Just like Aarsman she is looking for the reality behind the image. Her research platform is Facebook, which allows her to call in the help of a greater community. Photographs themselves moreover are a part of 'storytelling', of the way in which people relate to the world around them by telling stories. Just like in Lino Hellings' work the Internet is the place where images can get a new context and function. Photographs are not the end, but the beginning. Photographs need to be imbedded and have a clear functionality. The magic of photography is combated in both practices by turning photography into a deed.

### Meta photography

Whereas Lino Hellings and Andrea Stultiens elevate the photograph itself into research territory, other artists and photographers arrive at a new representation of the image, based on the research into the problematic status of photography, which comments on the old one, the meta-image. There are many examples of this.

The Dutch artist Anno Dijkstra has a fascination for violent news images, which are imprinted on our memories. For example, he took as a starting point for his artistic research the photograph of a dead politician. In May 2003 a popular right-wing politician was shot in the street in the Netherlands. The image of the dead body ruled the media for

days. Anno Dijkstra made real statuettes based on the image of a dead Pim Fortuyn. Viewers were even allowed to take these statuettes and put them on the mantelpiece at home, something which made visible how intractable an image really is. Because, who wants to have a statuette of a dead politician on the mantelpiece?



Anno Dijkstra, Proposition, 2012

In 2007 he did something comparable to the world famous Vietnam photograph by Nick Ut of the naked girl trying to flee the napalm cloud. He made a statue of this, which he placed in a remote field. People hung coats on the statue and eventually it was destroyed.



Anno Dijkstra, proposal nr 17, 2007

These projects make us think about the impossibility for us to relate to the photographic image. The representations they create are meta-images, in the sense that as an image they say things about the image. Moreover they bring back the interaction by doing something else with the images, by making them physical, touchable, changeable, transportable. Just like Hellings and Stultiens, Dijkstra is trying to make the image part of

the action.

Based on the perspective of the photograph as a deed, the project *The Day Nobody Died*<sup>viii</sup> by photographers Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin is the most radical. It is, moreover, the ultimate commentary on the fact that every event has to be photographed. In June of 2008 Broomberg and Chanarin travelled to Afghanistan. The idea was that they would travel with the British army as embedded artists to the frontline in the province of Helmand. Instead of their cameras they brought a 50 metres long and 76,2 centimetres wide roll of photographic paper with them in a cardboard box. During the first days of their stay there were many casualties to be mourned. On those days the artists did nothing with the paper they had brought with them. Only on the day when nothing happened the photographers unpacked their light-sensitive paper and exposed it to the sun. The result of this exposure they exhibited on their return in Paradise Row, London, entitled *The Day Nobody Died*.



The Day Nobody Died, 2008, Installation View<sup>ix</sup>

The question is, what was the real action? Exposing the photographic paper to the sun, or the journey the paper made into war territory? At any rate, for the photographers this

journey was very important. In the film they made of this transportation you can see how the wrapped, unwieldy, large role of photographic paper is dragged from vehicle to vehicle, transported through the desert, carried by the soldiers, only to be exposed to the sun on the day that nothing happened. Just as with Dijkstra the photographic image is turned into an action and the action becomes the commentary on the way photography works. Where Dijkstra makes physical images which emphasise the awkwardness of the image, Broomberg and Chanarin create an image which not only comments on the final product of photography, 'the photograph', but which can be considered a refusal of the action of (journalistic) photography. They refuse to turn a war incident into an image, but ultimately cannot escape documentation of the process in the shape of a film.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://schmid.wordpress.com/publications/books-on-demand/black-books/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://immediation.image-imatge.org/post/10164203989/one-year-of-books-joachim-schmid-but-is-it-art>

<sup>iii</sup> This image can be found at <http://immediation.image-imatge.org/post/10164203989/one-year-of-books-joachim-schmid-but-is-it-art>

<sup>iv</sup> These reviews were collected in the book *Ik zie, ik zie, De Aarsman Collectie* (2008). Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Podium

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.papaplatform.com>.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.papaplatform.com/index.php?VS=l&VT=m&SO=o&PC=l&SB=t&ID=&SE=gloves>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/HIPUganda?ref=stream>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.choppedliver.info/the-day-nobody-died/>

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